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English Education Cultural Identity and Religion in Timor-Leste A Critical Literature Review

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Abstract

This critical narrative review examines how scholarship connects English language education, cultural identity, and religion in Timor-Leste. A purposive audit of twenty candidate references and targeted source checks was completed on 20 October 2026. Eighteen references were retained, two were deferred because of inconsistent content or insufficient access to the primary article, and one Portuguese language research report was added. The nineteen sources, published between 2022 and 2026, were classified by setting, population, and type of evidence. Research on Timorese professionals, public signs, and general education provides contextual understanding but does not establish school learners' religious experiences in English classrooms. International studies of teachers offer comparative questions rather than evidence about Timorese learners. The synthesis links language hierarchies, imagined affiliations, institutional mediation, and learner agency in a framework for further inquiry. Pedagogical proposals require local evaluation. The review is selective and access limited; it establishes neither a national absence of research nor a trend in acceptance of English.

Keywords: English; identity; religion; culture; education; agency; multilingualism; Timor-Leste

Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Identitas Budaya dan Agama di Timor-Leste Sebuah Tinjauan Literatur Kritis

Abstrak

Tinjauan naratif kritis ini mengkaji hubungan pendidikan bahasa Inggris, identitas budaya, dan agama di Timor-Leste. Audit purposif atas dua puluh rujukan kandidat dan pemeriksaan sumber terarah dilakukan pada 20 Oktober 2026. Delapan belas rujukan dipertahankan, dua ditangguhkan karena ketidaksesuaian isi atau keterbatasan akses artikel primer, dan satu laporan berbahasa Portugis ditambahkan. Sembilan belas sumber terbitan 2022–2026 dikelompokkan menurut konteks, pelaku, dan jenis bukti. Kajian profesional Timor, tanda publik, dan pendidikan umum memberikan pemahaman kontekstual, tetapi tidak menetapkan pengalaman religius siswa di kelas bahasa Inggris. Studi guru di negara lain menyediakan pertanyaan pembanding, bukan bukti mengenai peserta didik Timor. Sintesis menghubungkan hierarki bahasa, afiliasi terbayang, mediasi institusional, dan agensi peserta didik sebagai kerangka penelitian berikutnya. Usulan pedagogis memerlukan evaluasi lokal. Pemilihan sumber bersifat terarah dan terbatas akses; tinjauan tidak membuktikan ketiadaan penelitian secara nasional atau tren penerimaan bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: Inggris; identitas; agama; budaya; pendidikan; agensi; multilingualisme; Timor-Leste

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INTRODUCTION

Timor-Leste became a sovereign state in 2002, entering independence with a complex linguistic landscape. Section 13 of its Constitution designates Tetun and Portuguese as official languages and provides for the valuing and development of Tetun and the other national languages. Section 159 provides for Indonesian and English as working languages within the civil service for as long as deemed necessary (Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2002). This arrangement reflects the legacies of Portuguese colonialism, the Indonesian occupation of 1975–1999, and the choices of a young state about the languages through

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which it represents itself (Narawaty, 2023). These histories provide a multilingual context for education and for the ways learners understand themselves.

Among the languages used in Timor-Leste, English serves functions that must be distinguished from those of Portuguese and Tetun. A language's policy status does not, by itself, explain what it means to learners. English language education therefore needs to be examined in relation to language use, social affiliations, and learning opportunities, without treating policy as a direct account of students' experiences.

Policy scholarship describes gradual changes that tend to favour Portuguese. Wu and Zhang (2023) argue that the Timorese government's incremental approach after the 2006 crisis continued to modify language policy, but did so slowly, producing generational differences, marginalising speakers of non-official languages, and leaving Tetun in an uncertain position because of limited legal support. Their analysis places classroom experiences within wider national negotiations over language. How far these policy changes are experienced in English classrooms remains an open question.

Evidence from public spaces adds another perspective. A study revisiting Dili's linguistic landscape found greater visibility of Portuguese and reduced visibility of English, with Tetun the only local language represented on public signs (Macalister, 2024b). An analysis of five local newspapers in early 2022 also found little English in news reporting, although it appeared in official announcements and advertisements (Macalister & Akoyt, 2024). These patterns do not explain how Timorese people themselves interpret English. Interviews with eleven young professionals in Dili offer a more direct account: for these participants, English could extend their Timorese identity (Quinto et al., 2025).

Religion is another relevant dimension. Narawaty (2023) discusses historical connections between Portuguese and liturgical language. This historical account provides context, but does not establish how students today understand English in relation to faith. Such experiences need to be explored with the people concerned, with attention to differences in belief and educational setting.

International literature on religion in English language teaching provides useful perspectives. Earlier debates often focused on evangelisation and critiques of neo-imperialism, whereas studies from non-Western settings present more varied accounts (Cruz Arcila, 2024). Research with Muslim teachers in Saudi Arabia, for example, identifies Islam as central to professional identity (Almayez, 2022). Muhalim (2023) shows how pedagogy informed by religious values can challenge dominant ideologies of English. From a theoretical perspective, Hamid (2023) proposes understanding English as a Southern language that speakers reshape for their own purposes.

Two complementary accounts place English education within this multilingual policy environment. Macalister (2024a) describes the position of English alongside Tetun and Portuguese, while Zein (2024) situates English education within educational policy in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. These contextual syntheses help frame the questions addressed here; they should not be read as direct measurements of Timorese learners' religious identities or as evidence that the prestige of English produces uniform opportunities. Institutional language choices and learners' interpretations require separate empirical investigation.

The distinction between motivation and investment sharpens this problem. Darvin and Norton (2023) explain that a desire to learn a language does not necessarily translate into participation when identity, ideology, and access to valued resources shape opportunities. This distinction helps formulate questions about who can use English, for what purposes, and with what recognition. It does not justify attributing particular aspirations or religious commitments to learners whose experiences have not been studied.

Translanguaging scholarship offers a further conceptual resource for considering English alongside learners' existing repertoires. Li and García (2022) question the treatment of languages as separate possessions and connect repertoires with decolonizing language education. Li (2022a) examines the political implications of a translanguaging stance, while Li (2022b) develops its methodological significance. These arguments support attention to meaning-making across linguistic and semiotic resources. Their relevance to Timor-Leste remains a question for local inquiry, rather than evidence that a particular multilingual classroom activity has already improved learning there.

Assessment also matters when considering whose language practices receive institutional recognition. Schissel (2024) examines decolonizing English language testing through questions about power and knowledge. For the present review, this provides a reason to ask how assessment may recognize or restrict learners' repertoires and cultural knowledge. It supplies a conceptual question, not a finding about Timorese examinations, and does not establish that culturally or religiously themed assessment is appropriate for every learner.

The central problem addressed in this review is the distance between a focus on English learners' experiences and the available evidence. Many sources on Timor-Leste examine policy, public spaces, or general education, while sources addressing religion largely concern other settings. Bringing these bodies of work together can generate useful questions, but cannot provide students' accounts that were never collected.

Three questions guide the review. First, what kinds of evidence connect English with identity in Timor-Leste, and whose experiences do they represent? Second, how can broader studies of Timorese language and education inform our understanding of learning conditions without being treated as direct evidence from English classrooms? Third, what questions about religion and learner agency can be developed from international comparisons, and what limits apply when transferring their explanations?

The article contributes a synthesis framework connecting language hierarchies, imagined affiliations, institutional mediation, and learner agency, while identifying the evidential support for each connection. The framework guides the interpretation of literature and the development of a research agenda. We do not claim to have tested causal relationships or to present Timorese students' religious experiences as new field findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review starts from the understanding that language learners and teachers enter classrooms as whole persons. Beliefs, cultural commitments, and spiritual lives help shape how they interpret what they learn and teach (Cruz Arcila, 2024). A review of language teacher identity in Malaysia makes a similar argument and identifies limited attention to religious beliefs in identity formation (Tyng et al., 2023). We understand cultural and religious identities as continually negotiated rather than fixed attributes. Claims lacking direct evidence are therefore identified as interpretations.

The concept of imagined communities offers a perspective on identities oriented towards the future. Quinto et al. (2025) use it to examine how young Timorese professionals imagine themselves as members of a global English-speaking community while remaining citizens of Timor-Leste. Their interview findings suggest that these affiliations need not exclude one another; participants describe layered identities. This perspective shifts attention towards the communities learners imagine joining through English and challenges the assumption that learning a foreign language necessarily entails abandoning one's own language.

Debates over ownership of English add a further perspective. Drawing on Bangladesh, Hamid (2023) proposes English as a Southern language, used, owned, and nativised by speakers in postcolonial

countries according to their needs. This concept relates to World Englishes, English as a lingua franca, and translanguaging, while calling for the decolonisation of English itself. For Timor-Leste, where a readily identifiable local variety of English has not been established in the newspaper evidence examined by Macalister and Akoyt (2024), this concept serves as a critical lens rather than an empirical claim.

Studies of religion and English language teaching illuminate teachers' roles without automatically representing students. Cruz Arcila (2024) examines the spiritual meanings articulated by eight teachers in rural Colombia. Almayez (2022) studies two Muslim teachers in Saudi Arabia, while Karimpour et al. (2024) examine ten teachers in Iran. These studies support further inquiry into the relationships among beliefs, institutions, and professional identity, while retaining distinctions between countries and participants.

Studies from Indonesia and southern Thailand provide regional comparisons. Andriani et al. (2026) examine two teachers' identities and the relationship between moral purposes and language learning. Farid et al. (2023) investigate learner motivation in Indonesian Islamic schools, while Andriani (2024) examines curriculum adaptation in one pesantren, or Islamic boarding school. Adaptations in these institutions do not establish the attitudes of all religious institutions towards English or the experiences of Timorese students.

For Timor-Leste, scholarship on policy and identity provides important context. Narawaty (2023) traces language shift and maintenance, while Wu and Zhang (2023) analyse policy through an incrementalist approach. Arguments about policy effects must be distinguished from direct measurements of students' attitudes or experiences in English classrooms.

Another strand examines language in public spaces. Macalister (2024b) revisits Dili's linguistic landscape, and Macalister and Akoyt (2024) analyse English use in newspapers. In the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region, Sudarmanto et al. (2023) find Indonesian dominant on outdoor signs, while Sudarmanto et al. (2025) connect public signage with local language vitality and cultural preservation. Linguistic landscapes provide evidence of differences between policy preferences and the languages people encounter in everyday public settings.

Local education research includes the position of Tetun in higher education (Anuno et al., 2026) and primary curriculum implementation (Quinn, 2023). A Portuguese-language report by Soares et al. (2023) adds a curriculum implementation perspective from INCT Timor-Leste. All three provide educational context rather than direct accounts of students' religious experiences in English lessons.

The analytical framework distinguishes four elements. Language hierarchies concern the legitimacy of language use; imagined affiliations concern aspirations; institutional mediation concerns rules, materials, and teachers' actions; and agency concerns learners' possibilities for accepting, reinterpreting, or rejecting available choices. Connections among these elements guide questions for inquiry rather than constituting tested causal relationships.

Religion is treated as one dimension that may matter to participants, alongside home language, location, educational experience, and social position. Religious identity is not inferred from nationality, names, or school affiliation. The framework accommodates students with different beliefs, mixed traditions, or no religious affiliation. The relationship between school norms and personal meaning remains an open question.

METHODS

This article is a critical narrative review based on purposive selection rather than a systematic review reported under PRISMA. Publications, rather than newly recruited participants, are the units of analysis. The nineteen-source analytical corpus covers 2022–2026 and includes journal articles, a proceedings

article, and a local research report. These source types are distinguished in the matrix rather than assumed to have uniform peer-review status.

The review design prioritizes critical interpretation and transparent limits rather than exhaustive retrieval, drawing on distinctions among review types discussed by Grant and Booth (2009) and Snyder (2019). Guidance on narrative-review quality also emphasizes clear aims, a described search, appropriate referencing, and scientific reasoning (Baethge et al., 2019). These works inform reporting; no formal SANRA score or systematic-review risk-of-bias assessment was undertaken. Eleven additional legal, contextual, theoretical, and methodological references support the framing and reporting of the article. They are outside the nineteen-source analytical corpus, its 2022–2026 publication window, and the classification counts in Figure 1 and Table 1.

The initial search in September 2026 was not accompanied by a complete record of search engines, individual search dates, all results, duplicates, and screening decisions. We have not reconstructed unavailable counts through estimation. During revision, we audited the twenty entries in the initial reference list and conducted targeted additional searches on 20 October 2026. Figure 1 represents this audit rather than the complete September search.

Targeted web searches used exact titles, author names, and DOIs to locate publisher pages, journal websites, and institutional repositories. Sources consulted included Cambridge Core, John Benjamins, Taylor & Francis, the UTS and EdUHK repositories, ERIC, Indonesian journal portals, and the website of the Instituto Nacional de Ciências e Tecnologia in Timor-Leste. Author-provided copies were used where available. Index records and news reports helped locate publications but did not replace primary articles in the synthesis of findings.

Examples of search strings were “Macalister” “Akoyt” “English in Timor”, “Imagined communities and English in Timor-Leste” Quinto Dita Corral, “The impact of language policy on national identity in Timor-Leste”, and Timor Leste educação língua identidade religião português 2023 2024 INCT. Specific title searches were also used for comparative sources. This approach prioritised tracing the initial sources and adding local material; it did not cover exhaustive searches of Scopus, Web of Science, or all Tetun- and Portuguese-language repositories.

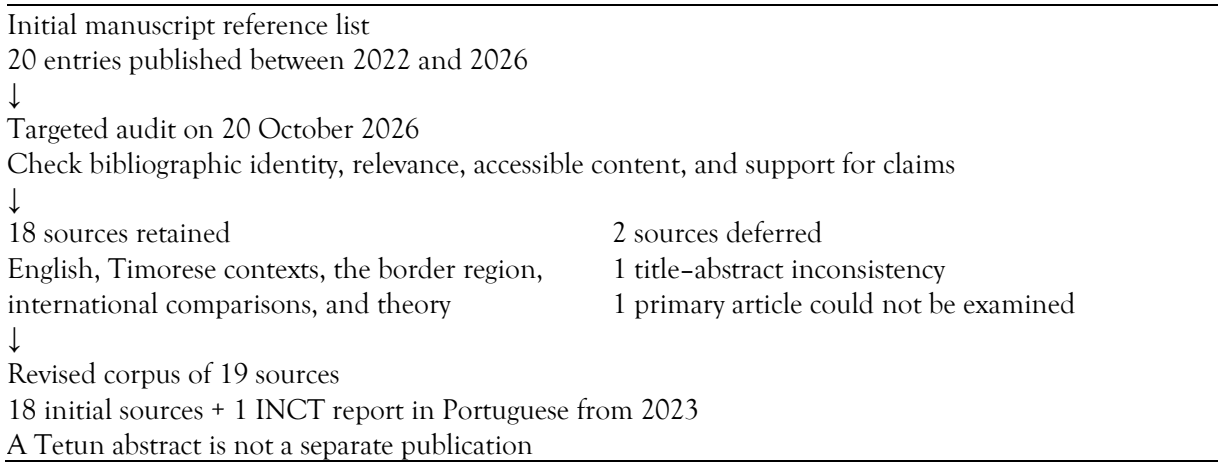
Sources were retained if they fell within the publication window, had traceable bibliographic details, addressed the review questions, and provided sufficient article content or an abstract to support the claims used. Priority was given to Timor-Leste, followed by the Indonesian border context and comparative studies connecting religion with learning or teacher identity. Theoretical sources were distinguished from empirical evidence. DOIs supported traceability and were not treated as guarantees of research quality.

Two initial sources were deferred. The dos Reis et al. (2025) entry has a title concerning language politics in Timor-Leste, but the abstract on the journal page and the opening PDF page concern vocabulary learning in Palangka Raya. This inconsistency remained unresolved, so we did not use its content as evidence. Muliana et al. (2026) could be located through indexing and news coverage, but the primary article could not be examined during this audit. We therefore did not retain specific claims about thirty students and code-mixing. Limited access does not establish that an article is nonexistent or of poor quality.

The Portuguese-language report by Soares et al. (2023), published by INCT Timor-Leste, was added to provide local educational context. The final corpus comprises eighteen publications from the initial list and one additional report. The Tetun abstract on the Macalister (2024b) publisher page was also examined, but was neither counted as a separate publication nor treated as a comprehensive search of Tetun literature.

For each source, we recorded authorship, year, setting, participants or objects studied, evidence type, and limits on claims. Five groups were formed according to their relationship to the review questions: A, English and adult Timorese identity; B, Timorese language and educational contexts; C, the Indonesian side of the border; D, international comparisons; and E, theory. No source in the selected corpus was used as direct evidence of Timorese students' religious experiences in English classrooms.

Figure 1. Source audit during revision



Note. The flow represents the audit of the initial reference list on 20 October 2026, rather than all web results or a reconstruction of the September search.

Table 1. Revised corpus and types of evidence used (N = 19)

A = English and adult Timorese identity; B = Timorese contexts; C = the Indonesian border context; D = international comparisons; E = theory.

No.	Source	Setting and focus	Limits on claims	Set
1	Quinto et al. 2025	11 young professionals in Dili; English and affiliation	Does not represent school students or religious experiences	A
2	Anuno et al. 2026	UNTL students and staff; the position of Tetun	Does not specifically examine English classrooms and religion	B
3	Macalister 2024b	Dili linguistic landscape; comparison of signs	Sign visibility does not establish individual attitudes	B
4	Macalister and Akoyt 2024	Timorese newspapers; functions of English	Does not examine classroom practices or experiences	B
5	Narawaty 2023	Language shift and maintenance in Timor-Leste	Historical context does not represent students' accounts	B
6	Quinn 2023	Primary curriculum; observations and teacher interviews	General curriculum rather than English education specifically	B
7	Soares et al. 2023	INCT report in Portuguese; primary curriculum	Contextual research report rather than a study of religion and ELT	B
8	Wu and Zhang 2023	Policy analysis and national identity	Policy arguments rather than a learner survey	B

No.	Source	Setting and focus	Limits on claims	Set
9	Sudarmanto et al. 2023	Linguistic landscape on the Indonesian side of the border	Public signs rather than Timorese students	C
10	Sudarmanto et al. 2025	Signs in Atambua, Kefamenanu, and the border region	Language visibility does not establish English learning effects	C
11	Almayez 2022	2 Muslim teachers in Saudi Arabia	Teacher identity does not represent Timorese student experiences	D
12	Andriani 2024	Curriculum development at one Indonesian pesantren	Institutional specificity limits transfer	D
13	Andriani et al. 2026	2 teachers in Indonesia and southern Thailand	Small number of cases in different settings	D
14	Cruz Arcila 2024	8 rural Colombian teachers; spiritual meanings	Does not establish Timorese students' acceptance of prayer	D
15	Farid et al. 2023	Learner motivation in Indonesian Islamic schools	Institutional contexts differ from Timor-Leste	D
16	Karimpour et al. 2024	10 teachers in Iran; ideology and identity	Teachers' tensions rather than students' responses	D
17	Muhalim 2023	2 Indonesian teachers; religious discourse and ideology	Conceptual possibilities rather than intervention effects in Timor-Leste	D
18	Tyng et al. 2023	Conceptual review concerning Malaysia	Does not provide primary Malaysian student data	D
19	Hamid 2023	Theory of English as a Southern language drawing on Bangladesh	Conceptual lens rather than Timorese findings	E

The synthesis compared what each group could substantiate. Where only abstracts or author summaries were accessible, we confined claims to the information available in those sections. We did not add details about instruments or results that could not be checked. No effect sizes were pooled, numerical quality scores assigned, or intercoder agreement calculated. Narrative patterns were not interpreted as estimates of social prevalence.

The audit remains susceptible to selection, access, language, and publication biases. Selection began with the manuscript's reference list, so relevant works absent from that list may still have been missed. Adding one Portuguese-language report broadens the context but does not resolve limitations in language coverage. Reading the Tetun abstract of one article does not replace a broader search by researchers able to review local publications. The gaps reported therefore concern the selected corpus rather than all knowledge available in Timor-Leste.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the Corpus and Scope of the Evidence

The revised corpus comprises nineteen sources: one study of English and adult Timorese professional identity (A), seven contextual sources on Timor-Leste including one Portuguese-language report (B), two studies on the Indonesian side of the border (C), eight international comparisons (D), and one theoretical source (E). Classification follows settings, participants, and objects of study rather than

journals' national or international labels. Different research designs and source types are not treated as equivalent evidence.

The distribution of publication years within this selected list is not used to infer growing research interest or increasing local authorship. Purposive selection and access limitations do not support such bibliometric conclusions. The Portuguese-language report broadens the local context but does not ensure representation of all Timor-Leste publications.

Three conclusions about the evidence follow. First, there is direct research on English and adult Timorese identity. Second, sources explain local policy and educational contexts, but their focus differs from English learners' religious experiences. Third, international comparisons provide concepts and questions rather than evidence that the same dynamics occur in Timor-Leste. These limitations do not imply that such experiences are unimportant or have never been studied beyond the corpus.

The scale and type of evidence limit its explanatory reach. Eleven professionals in Dili do not represent all students, and a study at one university does not represent every institution. Public signs document displayed choices rather than every reader's feelings. Addressing these gaps requires research with the relevant participants rather than transferring conclusions between different objects of study.

English and Adult Professional Identity in Timor-Leste

The most direct evidence of how Timorese people negotiate identity through English comes from Quinto et al. (2025). Through semi-structured interviews with eleven young professionals in Dili, they identify five themes showing the importance of English in participants' lives and their aspirations for the nation's future. Participants' imagined communities indicate layered identities: they affiliate with a global English-speaking community while retaining a sense of belonging to Timor-Leste. For these participants, English can extend Timorese identity rather than replace it.

These findings are not equated with school students' experiences. Within the corpus that could be examined, no direct evidence establishes how Timorese students connect religion with English learning. Adult professionals' attitudes cannot fill that gap.

Hamid (2023) provides a theoretical account of English as a Southern language, emphasising how speakers give it meaning within their own social conditions. We use this concept as a critical lens rather than evidence of a Timorese variety of English or of a successful pedagogy. How learners make English meaningful still requires local data.

The identity study involved eleven young professionals in the capital. Their views may not represent students in other municipalities, groups with different educational access, or other generations. Data collected at one point in time do not support conclusions about changes in acceptance of English across the population.

Articulated affiliations need to be distinguished from observed practices. To investigate their relationship, interviews could be combined with observations of language use in settings to which participants consent. This is a direction for research rather than a finding that Timorese students exhibit a particular gap between attitudes and practices.

Curricular implications of identity meanings need to be evaluated with learners. Adult professionals' aspirations are insufficient to determine all students' needs. Teacher education and materials development could explore questions about future affiliations while examining language objectives, access, and the diversity of experiences.

Timorese Contextual Evidence on Language and Public Spaces

Macalister and Akoyt (2024) show that English in Timor-Leste newspapers serves particular functions, including announcements and advertisements. This evidence describes one domain of use rather than all

public conversation or students' experiences. The absence of particular English forms in the media is insufficient to establish learners' acceptance or rejection of an identity.

Dili's linguistic landscape adds a temporal dimension. Compared with research conducted more than a decade earlier, when English dominated commercial signage, the revisited landscape shows greater visibility of Portuguese and reduced visibility of English (Macalister, 2024b). Macalister interprets this pattern as suggesting an increasing association between Portuguese and expressions of Timorese identity. This interpretation requires care because it draws on public signs rather than learners' accounts. Whether students learning English experience the same shift is unknown.

At the policy level, Wu and Zhang (2023) critique the priority accorded to Portuguese and the position of Tetun. We treat this as policy analysis rather than student survey evidence. Narawaty (2023) situates changes in language status within a historical context, helping explain why interpretations across generations require caution.

Reading media, signage, and policy sources together suggests that domains of language use and recognition may differ. The consequences for students' learning opportunities require investigation. This corpus does not measure how many opportunities different groups of learners have to use English outside class.

English and Indonesian also have distinct histories, although both are discussed as working languages. These differences raise questions about the social meanings of language. They do not establish that English is more religiously neutral, more foreign, or more acceptable to particular students.

The limits of the newspaper evidence are important. Macalister and Akoyt (2024) note that newspapers are a relatively formal genre in which features of informal language use are less likely to appear. The absence of a distinct Timorese English variety in their corpus therefore does not establish its absence from everyday conversation, social media, or classrooms. They propose further research on possible growth in interpersonal uses of English. For this review, that proposal highlights the limited documentation of English use closest to learners' everyday lives.

Timorese Contextual Evidence on Curricula and Institutions

Anuno et al. (2026) examine the position of Tetun at UNTL in a study involving students and staff. English appears in relation to research and international engagement, while the principal focus is Tetun's position in academic life. This evidence describes institutional hierarchies rather than students' particular experiences of English learning or religion.

Quinn (2023) examines primary curriculum implementation through observations in nine schools and brief teacher interviews. Teacher adaptations included the omission of some important learning activities. Flexibility therefore does not automatically indicate better practice. The study concerns general curriculum implementation and does not support claims that English classrooms across Timor-Leste use identical scripts or language patterns.

A local Portuguese-language source complements this context. Soares et al. (2023) examine curriculum implementation in the first and second cycles of basic education through document analysis, interviews, observation, teacher questionnaires, and student tests. Their report connects implementation difficulties with students, teachers, policy, and the environment. Its relevance here is that school experiences are shaped by several conditions together; it does not provide evidence about religion in English classrooms.

These three educational sources explain institutional mediation rather than religious experiences in English classrooms. Policy, resources, and teachers' judgements may shape students' opportunities, but the direction of these influences must be investigated through observed learning activities.

Classroom language choices may enable or constrain participation. The use of Tetun, Portuguese, or the target language needs to be assessed in relation to activity objectives and students' experiences. This corpus does not establish that one choice is always preferable. Teacher flexibility likewise does not automatically indicate successful learning, as the omitted activities in the general curriculum study illustrate.

The selected corpus provides insufficient direct research to draw conclusions about Timorese students' religious experiences in English lessons. Evidence concerning the primary curriculum and Tetun at university remains useful context. This limitation must not be converted into a claim that no relevant research exists beyond the search.

Border Evidence from the Indonesian Side

Cultural identity in Timor-Leste extends across national borders. Sudarmanto et al. (2023) examine public signs in the Indonesia–Timor-Leste border region and find Indonesian dominant on outdoor signage in Atambua and Kefamenanu, without signs accommodating Timor-Leste's official languages. The authors associate this pattern with shared linguistic and cultural heritage and longstanding kinship ties. Their account suggests that relations among border communities predate current divisions in language policy.

Sudarmanto et al. (2025) extend this inquiry by focusing on local language vitality in the border region. They view public signs as reflecting language hierarchies and power relations, with implications for language policy and cultural preservation. Both studies concern the Indonesian side and therefore do not represent Timorese learners' experiences. They nevertheless help explain how language and culture in the region extend across state boundaries.

Relations among border communities provide a context for developing cross-border questions rather than evidence that students in both countries experience English in the same way. Geographical proximity does not remove differences in policy, institutions, or learning opportunities.

For research design, the border region could provide comparisons if locations and groups are clearly specified. Public signage studies need to be distinguished from interviews with learners. Further research could examine relationships between cross-border contexts and language choices using data collected from the people concerned.

International Comparisons on Religion and English Language Teaching

Group D identifies several ways religion relates to professional practice. Cruz Arcila (2024) examines accounts from eight teachers in rural Colombia and describes spiritual meanings within their roles. The study helps formulate questions about care and teachers' social roles. It does not establish whether Timorese students welcome classroom prayer, feel pressured by it, or associate it with national identity.

These comparisons were not selected on the assumption that their societies are identical to Timor-Leste. Shared religious traditions do not guarantee similar authority relations, liturgical languages, colonial experiences, or student freedoms. Concepts and questions can inform research design, but local answers cannot be borrowed from other countries.

Almayez (2022) focuses on two Muslim teachers in Saudi Arabia, while Karimpour et al. (2024) examine ten English teachers in Iran and tensions between institutional ideology and personal meaning. A shared concern with identity does not remove differences between countries and power relations. Teacher data from these studies are not used to attribute beliefs, agreement, or resistance to Timorese students.

Muhalim (2023) discusses two Indonesian teachers and the possibilities for religious discourse to reinterpret ideologies of English. Andriani et al. (2026) study two teachers in Indonesia and southern Thailand and caution that moral purposes may displace attention to language competence. These findings

raise questions about relationships between educational purposes; they do not establish that religious content consistently supports or hinders learning.

Andriani (2024) examines English curriculum adaptation in one pesantren. Farid et al. (2023) investigate relationships between Islamic school environments and English learner motivation. Both inform questions about institutional mediation, while their school types and religious traditions remain distinct from those in Timor-Leste. Tyng et al. (2023) provide a conceptual review of religion and teacher identity in Malaysia rather than newly collected accounts from Malaysian students.

If these comparisons inform research in Timor-Leste, relevant questions concern how students interpret cultural and religious materials, when they feel supported or constrained, and how they respond to language choices and teachers' actions. These remain open questions. We do not assume that English is neutral, secular, threatening to faith, or always adaptable without tension.

Differences in institutions and participants impose important limits. Findings concerning teachers in religious schools do not automatically represent learners in public schools, minority groups, or students without religious affiliations. Students' responses need to be collected voluntarily, allowing for disagreement, agreement, or interpretations that differ from teachers' expectations.

Asking learners about faith involves personal experience, particularly when participants are children. Research requires ethical review, appropriate consent, freedom to decline participation or questions, and protection of identity. Researchers need to avoid leading questions and assumptions of uniform belief. These requirements for sensitive research do not justify claiming that no related research has ever been conducted in Timor-Leste.

Critical Synthesis of Language Hierarchies and Institutional Mediation of Learner Agency

The synthesis connects four elements. Language hierarchies shape recognition and access within a domain. Imagined affiliations concern the possible memberships participants associate with a language. Institutions mediate opportunities through rules, materials, and teachers' actions. Learner agency concerns how students accept, modify, or reject those opportunities and positions. In this corpus, evidence for each element comes from different groups of sources; their relationships do not yet constitute a tested empirical model.

The value of this framework lies in distinguishing questions that are often conflated. Policy can confer status on a language without guaranteeing emotional attachment. Professionals may identify with English without indicating a national shift. Teachers may understand their actions as care while students interpret them differently. Research connecting these elements must collect evidence from the relevant participants and examine divergence as well as alignment.

Within this framework, English may be associated with aspirations for mobility, but actual opportunities cannot be inferred from aspirations alone. Research needs to examine who gains access to learning, opportunities to use the language, and recognition of their abilities. These relationships may differ by location and resources.

An ethical implication is the need to examine the distribution of opportunities. English language education may widen access or deepen inequality, depending on conditions that require investigation. The selected literature has not established a common direction of effects for all Timorese students.

Local language speakers receive limited attention in this debate. Macalister (2024b) reports Tetun as the only local language visible in the public landscape studied, while Wu and Zhang (2023) describe speakers of non-official languages as marginalised. In the border context, Sudarmanto et al. (2025) connect public signage with local language vitality and cultural preservation. If English language education

expands without attending to home languages, it could add another hierarchy above languages that already have limited protection. This is a plausible concern requiring investigation; the literature does not demonstrate that English learning accelerates local language shift in Timor-Leste.

Changes in policy and language visibility do not show that everyone's identity is changing in the same direction. Research on changing affiliations requires longitudinal data and a clear account of whose experiences are observed. The framework preserves the distinction between changes in language domains and changes in personal experience.

Proposed Pedagogical Implications and a Research Agenda

The following pedagogical possibilities are proposals arising from the review rather than practices demonstrated to have been implemented or successful in Timor-Leste. Teachers could develop English activities that make room for local narratives and students' linguistic repertoires. Their suitability needs to be assessed with teachers and learners, considering language objectives, understanding of materials, and opportunities to participate. The use of several languages does not, by itself, guarantee improved learning outcomes.

Where materials address religion, participation needs to respect differences in belief and the right not to disclose personal experiences. Cultural themes could be offered through alternative tasks. A religious practice should not be assumed to represent all students merely because it is common in a school setting. Evaluation should examine who gains opportunities, who chooses to remain silent, and whether language assessment remains separate from conformity to religious beliefs.

Teacher development could examine concrete classroom decisions, including situations in which adapting materials supports understanding and those in which adaptation removes important activities. This proposal follows the need to investigate relationships between policy, professional decisions, and student experiences. The review does not prescribe a single national approach on the basis of small case studies or shared religion.

Further research could use narrative interviews, classroom observation, and analysis of teaching materials to explore how students connect English with home languages, aspirations, and personal values. School selection should include relevant geographical and institutional variation. Research beyond Dili is important so that urban experiences do not become the sole account. Questions about religion should be asked where meaningful to participants, who may choose not to answer.

Research involving students and teachers in the same classrooms would help compare teaching intentions with learning experiences. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess changes in affiliations or attitudes; a study conducted at one point in time cannot establish growing acceptance of English. Research could also examine how access to materials and opportunities to use English vary with location and resources.

Collaboration with local researchers proficient in Tetun and Portuguese would broaden searching, interpretation of terminology, and contextual assessment. Language proficiency alone does not ensure representation; participant selection, researcher positionality, and relationships with schools need to be explained. Research involving children requires ethical review, appropriate consent, freedom to decline, and safeguards against unwanted disclosure of identity or beliefs.

CONCLUSION

The selected corpus supports an interpretation of English language education in Timor-Leste within language hierarchies and layered affiliations. However, evidence from adult professionals, public signs, general curricula, and teachers in other countries cannot replace Timorese students' accounts of culture

and religion in English learning. The review contributes by clarifying these distinctions and developing a framework and questions for further research.

Pedagogical proposals require evaluation with local participants rather than presentation as tested findings. The conclusions are limited to the nineteen selected sources and the content that could be examined. This targeted narrative search establishes neither a national absence of research nor the prevalence of particular experiences or trends in attitudes over time.

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Conflicts of Interest

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Ethics and Availability of Materials

This review analyses published literature and reports no recruitment of new participants or collection of new participant data. The references and source-classification matrix are included in the article. No additional research dataset is presented.

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